

Dear Vermont Veteran,

Let me take this opportunity to thank you and your family for your service to our country.

As the new Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I look forward to working for service members, Reservists, National Guard members, military retirees, veterans and their families to provide them timely access to their earned benefits. In that regard, I believe that we are making progress. More, however, needs to be done.

In Vermont, in the last several years, we have made good progress in primary health care by expanding the number of Community Based Outreach Clinics (CBOCs) in the state from three to five. In addition to the long-standing clinics in Colchester, Rutland and Bennington, we have added beautiful new facilities in Brattleboro and Newport. We have also recently made some significant improvements to the VA Medical Center at White River Junction – including a new health facility for women veterans and an inpatient treatment center for substance abuse.

Recently, the VA released a report to Congress that homelessness among veterans had declined 17.2 percent since 2009. In Vermont, we have been able to effectively address this crisis through the construction and improvement of a number of facilities, such as the Canal Street Veterans Housing in Winooski, the Veterans' Place in Northfield, the Dodge House in Rutland, the Veterans Inc. Transitional Housing in Bradford, and Home At Last in Brattleboro. These nonprofit programs are truly helping veterans and their families in their time of need.

While we work to expand and improve VA health care, housing, educational opportunities and other programs, I am mindful of the concern that many have about the length of time it takes to process VA disability claims. No veteran in this country should have to wait years to have a claim processed. The very first hearing I held as Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, on March 13, addressed this serious issue. At that hearing, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki told the Committee that he was working to transform the benefits system, which is bogged down with paper, into a modern, digital, paperless system. His goal is to ensure that, by 2015, claims will be completed in 125 days with 98% accuracy. I look forward to working with the Secretary to make that ambitious goal a reality.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank virtually every Veterans' and Military Service Organizations in the country who joined me in opposing the adoption of the Chained Consumer Price Index (CPI) for calculating the annual Cost-Of-Living-Adjustment (COLA) for veterans' disability compensation, veterans' survivors compensation, social security compensation and military retirement pay. The Chained CPI formula would reduce future COLAs for disabled veterans by tens of thousands of dollars during their lifetimes. The Chained CPI would also make significant cuts in Social Security. Deficit reduction is a serious issue that must be addressed, but we must not balance the budget on the backs of some of the most vulnerable people in our country.

Lastly, I would like to invite you to a Town Meeting on Veterans' Issues that I will be holding on Saturday, June 1. We will start the day with a meeting in White River Junction, followed by meetings in Brattleboro and Bennington. For more information about those meetings or if you think that we can help you with any problem you may have with the VA. Please give my office a toll-free call at 1-800-339-9834.

Again, thank you for your service to our country,

Sincerely,

Bernie Sanders
United States Senator